



Making Referrals

Child care providers and other early childhood professionals are in an ideal position to observe young children's growth and progress. A provider might be the first person, besides the parents, who suspects a child is not developing as expected for his or her age. Providers need to pay attention to their concerns because children who have developmental delays or significant behavioral challenges benefit from the earliest possible intervention.

It is very important that child care providers become familiar with programs in their communities that provide specialized services for families (the back of this tip sheet has information about finding these programs). Staff from these agencies can help you find support and provide information about resources that are available to all children and families, often free of charge. For example, every state is required by federal law to have a "child find" program to identify children's needs as early as possible (for children birth to 21). A simple screen test determines if the child meets the eligibility criteria for the special services provided. Birth to 3 offers screening and evaluations for children ages 0-3 and public schools offer screening and evaluations for children beginning at 3 years of age. With parent permission, child care providers can be part of the evaluation process. You can encourage parents to take part in community screening programs for vision, hearing and speech.

So, what do you do when you have concerns about a child's development? The process for making a referral is described below. Be sure to document each step in writing so that you can refer back to your notes at a later date, if necessary.

- 1. Make Sure Expectations are Developmentally Appropriate.** A particular child's development may seem problematic simply because of a provider's limited past experience with young children or inappropriate expectations for the child's development. Expectations for young children tend to fall into two categories: Developmental milestones (walking or talking) and social skills (paying attention or sitting still) which may vary depending upon the child's cultural background and developmental stage.
- 2. Observe and Record.** Recording the child's behavior for a week or two can help you decide whether what you think is happening is definitely happening. Careful observation can assure that your current concerns are accurate and forms the foundation for discussions with staff members and parents. **Observations are most useful when you record specifically what the child says or does (objective observation) rather than interpretation of what the child says or does (subjective observation).**
- 3. Express Your Concerns.** A critical step in referring a child for evaluation is to express your concerns to the parents and get their consent. Although consent is not required to submit a referral, parents are partners in caring for their child, and it is important to work together. This can be simply done by saying, "This is what I'm seeing here. Is it something you see at home?" or "Have you noticed....?" Often parents have had similar concerns or have noticed or observed similar behavior. Sometime parents react defensively or become angry; these are sensitive issues. Be careful to use descriptions of the child's behavior and avoid references to any perceived disability. For instance, it might be helpful to say: "Basil looks away when I ask him a question and does not answer me. What does he do when you ask him a questions?" rather than, "I think Basil has a hearing loss."
- 4. Develop a Plan of Action.** Meet with the family to discuss options and develop a plan of action. It is important that parents be part of this process; there may be a period of time for family members to accept the issue at hand and be ready to take steps to seek assistance from outside professionals, if necessary. The child care provider may need to be prepared to take smaller steps to address their concerns.



Making Referrals

Making it Work: A Plan of Action

As you develop a plan of action with the parent(s), remember that there are many options from which they may choose:

- ◇ **Use What You Learn from Each Other.** Parents may have suggestions for working with their child that you have not tried. In addition you may have ideas about things they could do to prepare the child to participate more readily in your activities in child care.
- ◇ **Do Nothing.** This option is difficult when you still have concerns even after talking with the parent(s), but if they are extremely resistant you will need to let it go for a time and continue to observe the situation. Let the parent(s) know that you are available to talk again, should they choose to.
- ◇ **Wait and See.** When you choose this option, the child care provider and the parent(s) both agree to watch for the targeted behaviors in preparation for getting together and comparing notes. After an agreed-upon period of time, you can talk again about what you each observed and make another plan of action, if necessary.
- ◇ **Assessment by a Qualified Professional.** You can help parents locate the appropriate Birth to 3, public school, medical or other agency and provide support to the family as they go through an evaluation process: providing your observations of the child, helping fill out paperwork, and offering your program as a natural environment for assessment.
- ◇ **Coordinate Services.** If the assessment does indeed reflect the child's need for specialized services, you can ask for parent permission to team up with the other professionals to plan for appropriate child care services.

Obviously, the process does not always go smoothly nor does the problem have a simple solution. Whatever the outcome, you will have done your best to provide the resources and support young children need to develop and grow at the best pace for them.

Resources:

Wisconsin First Step Referral Hotline: 1-800-642-7837

<http://www.mch-hotlines.org/wisconsin-first-step>

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning

<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards

<http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>

Training Opportunities:

The Registry Training Calendar

<https://www.the-registry.org>

WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar

<http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>

MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP)

<http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/meca/sns/default.htm>

This document is a modification of the Making Referrals tip sheet created by Montana Child Care plus+,

<http://www.ccplus.org/Products.html>. This document was modified for use by the State of Wisconsin.

Race to the Top –ELC is a cross-departmental grant that uses the talent, experience, and vision of three Wisconsin state department: Department of Children and Families, Public Instruction, and Health Services. The contents of this document were developed under the RTTT-ELC grant. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Federal Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

